

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0425/01 0581558
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 271558Z FEB 06
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9905
INFO RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1531
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1117
RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS PRIORITY 7149
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT PRIORITY 8079
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 1218

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000425

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG FOR LAWRENCE
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/26/2016
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: GOT RELEASES MORE THAN 1600 PRISONERS, INCLUDING
SOME POLITICALS

REF: TUNIS 387

Classified By: Ambassador William Hudson for Reasons 1.4 b & d

¶1. (C) Summary: On February 26, all daily newspapers carried an official GOT press release stating that President Ben Ali freed 1,298 prisoners and granted "conditional freedom" to 359 others. Notable among those released were approximately 70 members of banned Tunisian Islamist party an-Nahdha, including Hamadi Jebali, the former editor of an-Nahdha's now defunct newspaper al-Fajr. Also notable was the release of six detainees, known as the Zarzis group, who had been arrested in 2003 for allegedly preparing to commit terrorist attacks. International and domestic human rights NGOs, who have long called for the release of political prisoners in Tunisia, had been particularly vocal about Jebali and the Zarzis group. This prisoner release stands out both because of the large number of prisoners released, and because it departed from the usual practice of amnesties or pardons coinciding with significant national holidays. This has led to much speculation as to the reason for the release, which is most likely due to increasing pressure from domestic and international NGOs and activists, and USG and other diplomatic pressure on improving human rights. For suggested press guidance on the political prisoner release see para 6. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On February 26, all Tunisian daily newspapers carried an official GOT press release stating that President Ben Ali freed 1,298 prisoners and granted "conditional freedom" to 359 others. (NB: "Conditional freedom", or administrative detention, refers to a GOT procedure similar to parole conditions wherein former prisoners are subjected to controls such as checking in at police stations, restrictions on travel and place of residence, etc.) According to the article, the decision was taken during a presidential meeting with Minister of Interior Rafik Belhaj Kacem and Minister of Justice and Human Rights Bechir Tekkari. Ben Ali reportedly emphasized the necessity of following up with the newly freed detainees to facilitate their reintegration into society and to limit the potential recurrence of crimes.

¶3. (C) According to multiple sources, including international press reports and the website of banned Tunisian Islamist party an-Nahdha, approximately 70 of those released had been in prison for ties to an-Nahdha, including Hamadi Jebali, the former editor of an-Nahdha's now defunct newspaper al-Fajr. Jebali's case had received widespread attention, with international press freedom and human rights groups calling for his release. Also notable among those

released were six detainees, known as the Zarzis group, who had been charged and sentenced for allegedly preparing to commit terrorist attacks, and who, according to the GOT, had sought logistical support from al-Qaeda. Domestic and international human rights organizations alleged that the Zarzis detainees had been arrested only for visiting suspicious Internet websites. These same NGOs have demanded their release since their initial arrest in 2003.

¶4. (C) The announcement was met with appreciation by the human rights community in Tunisia. The Tunisian NGO International Association for the Support of Political Prisoners (AISPP) maintains a database of those it considers to be political prisoners, which before the recent pardon listed 410 "prisoners of opinion". This list included 155 prisoners sentenced under the 2003 anti-terrorism law. (NB: Human Rights groups allege that many detainees arrested under this law have not been given fair trial.) Minus the anti-terrorism law detainees, and with the recent liberation of 70 an-Nahdha prisoners, according to the AISPP list there are likely approximately 200 "prisoners of opinion" still imprisoned, most of whom are presumed an-Nahdha members.

¶5. (C) Comment: Prisoner releases, including the release of political prisoners, have been common on national holidays in recent years. This most recent release stands out both because of the large number of prisoners released, and because it does not coincide with any significant national holiday. This has led to much speculation as to the reason behind the presidential announcement. Some believe that the release is tied to the 50th anniversary of Tunisian independence from France on March 20. Other potential motives for the timing of the release given by international press commentators and local interlocutors include the 1st birthday of Ben Ali's infant son.

¶6. (C) Comment (cont'd): However, some in the activist community see the release as Ben Ali bowing ever so slightly to pressure from human rights groups, such as the 18 October Committee (18OC) (reftel), which has demanded a general amnesty for all political prisoners. Two days before the announcement, 18OC organized a demonstration in downtown Tunis calling for free expression and association and the release of political prisoners, specifically mentioning, among others, the Zarzis group. While the demonstration was predictably prevented by police, it was covered by al-Jazeera, which many Tunisians now watch to obtain independent news on Tunisia not available domestically. Most likely, the release is in response to a combination of pressure from both domestic and international human rights NGOs and USG and other diplomatic pressure on improving human rights.

Suggested press guidance text:

We understand that the Government of Tunisia released Sunday, February 26, a number of prisoners, some of whom have been described by independent observers as political prisoners.

We welcome this development and encourage the government of Tunisia to continue to undertake actions consistent with its declared intentions to engage in greater democratic reform.

End suggested press guidance text.
HUDSON